

Patti Smith on Writing, Life, Art and William S. Burroughs.

Along the path of his long and highly industrious creative life, writer William S. Burroughs was on many occasions asked that immortal question: “Do you have any words of advice for young people?”

Here, in a somewhat dramatic role, reversal one of Burroughs’ most ardent admirers finds herself providing similar sage words of advice on Writing, Life and Art as well as reflections on the advice given to her by William S. Burroughs when she was starting out as a young emerging artist.

Patti Smith appeared last year at the Louisiana Literature Festival, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art where she spoke to an audience captivated by her charismatic charm and frank openness about the life challenges and dilemmas involved in pursuing a creative life.

Words of advice for young people... from Patti Smith

A writer or any artist can’t expect to be embraced by the people. You know I’ve done records where it seemed like no one listened to them. You write poetry books that maybe you know fifty people read and you just keep doing your work because you have to because it’s your calling. But it’s beautiful to be embraced by the people. Some people have said to me well you know, ‘Don’t you think that kind of success spoils one as an artist or you know if you’re a punk rocker you don’t want to have a hit record?’ and I say ‘Well I say well fuck you!’ It’s just like one just does their work for the people and the more people you can touch the more wonderful it is. You don’t do your work and then say well I only want the cool people to read it. You know you want everyone to be transported or hopefully inspired by it.

When I was really young William Burroughs told me – I was really struggling we never had any money – and the advice that William gave me was built a good name and keep your name clean. Don’t make compromises. Don’t worry about making a bunch of money or being successful. Be concerned with doing good work and make the right choices and protect your work. And if you build a good name eventually you know that name will be its own currency. And I remember when he told me that and I said, ‘Yeah, but William, my name’s Smith you know’ (just joking!).

To be an artist, actually to be a human being in these times it’s all difficult. You have to go through life hopefully you know trying to stay healthy being as happy as you can pursuing and doing what you want. If what you want is to have children, if what you want is to be a baker. If what you want is to live out in the woods or try to save the environment, or maybe what you want is to write scripts for detective shows. It doesn’t really matter you know. What matters is to know what you want and pursue it and understand that it’s going to be hard. Because life is really difficult. You’re going to lose people you love. You’re going to suffer heartbreak. Sometimes you’ll be sick. Sometimes you’ll have a really

bad toothache. Sometimes you'll be hungry. But on the other end, you'll have the most beautiful experiences. Sometimes just the sky. Sometimes you know a piece of work that you do that feels so wonderful. Or you find somebody to love. Or your children. There's beautiful things in life so when you are suffering it's part of the package. You look at it: we're born and we also have to die. We know that. So it makes sense that we're going to be really happy and things are going to be really fucked up too. Just ride with it. It's like a roller coaster ride. It's never going to be perfect. It's going to have perfect moments and then rough spots but it's all worth it. Believe me, I think it is.

You know I'm sure that each generation can say that their time was the best and the worst of times. But I think the right now we are at something different that I've never seen. It's a pioneering time because there is no other their time in history like right now. And that's what makes it unique. It's not unique because we have renaissance style artists – it's unique because it's a time of the people because technology has really democratized self-expression. Instead of a handful of people making their own records or writing their own songs everybody can write them. Everyone can post a poem on the Internet and have people read it. Everyone has access and access that they've never had before. There is possibilities for global striking. There's possibilities for bringing down these corporations and governments who think they rule the world because we can unite as one people through technology. We're all still figuring it out and what power that we actually have. But the people still do have the power more than ever. And I think right now we're going through this painful sort of like adolescence. Again, what do we do with this technology? What do we do with our world? Who are we? But it also makes it exciting. You know all the young people right now the new generations they're pioneers in a new time. So, I say stay strong. Try to have fun, but stay clean, stay healthy because you know you have a lot of challenges ahead. And be happy.

Vision of Patti Smith's talk in conversation with Christian Lund at the Louisiana Literature festival August 24, 2012, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art can be found on Vimeo at: <http://vimeo.com/57857893>

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